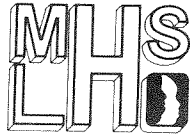

Michigan League for Human Services



Comments on House Bills 5438 - 5446

House Committee on Family and Children Services

November 30, 2005

Lansing, MI

The Michigan League for Human Services is a state-level policy organization dedicated to ensuring that the needs of Michigan's low-income residents are met and that low-income families achieve economic self-sufficiency. The League has been in existence since 1912 and is comprised of over 1,800 organizational and individual members from across Michigan who represent business, labor, human services professionals, representatives of state and local government, faith-based organizations, academics and concerned citizens.

The League was actively involved in the debate over state and federal welfare reform in 1995 and 1996 and has closely monitored the impact of state and federal policies on the ability of the state's poorest families—those receiving cash assistance—to achieve economic self-sufficiency. It should be noted that we do not define economic self-sufficiency as simply being free of the welfare system. Rather, we define economic self-sufficiency as the ability of a family to provide for its basic needs on an ongoing basis without public or private support.

Over the past decade welfare policy in Michigan has been defined by the perpetuation of policies intended only to reduce the receipt of cash assistance—not to help families become self-sufficient. The result is that individuals who are the least job ready, those with the lowest educational and skill levels and those with other barriers to successful labor market attachment remain dependent on our cash assistance system.

The package of House Bills under consideration open the door to educational advancement and training as the means to achieve self-sufficiency. However, for the goal of self-sufficiency to be realized, the legislation must also be aligned with the reality of the state's economy and labor market and with the policies and procedures of the state's educational institutions and training programs.

The League has several comments related to House Bills 5438 - 5446, which are outlined below.

- The League strongly supports the requirement for an in-depth assessment of a client's abilities and skills in order to make the most appropriate referral to suitable activities, educational programs or work. An in-depth assessment has not been part of Michigan's current program and the result has been repeated failure for many individuals.

- The imposition of a 48 month time limit on receipt of cash assistance will have a detrimental impact on more than 36,000 children across Michigan. Many of their parents have been employed—numerous times—but have been unsuccessful in sustaining employment. For many, significant personal barriers prevent them from remaining employed. For other, educational and skill deficits prevent them from gaining a firm foothold in the labor force. These parents are often the first to fall victim to Michigan's harsh economic cycles, but the safety net has prevented these families from being completely destitute. A lifetime can be a very long time for a young mother without the education and skills needed to compete in today's labor force. Ultimately, it is her children who will suffer from the absence of a safety net.

While we would prefer that Michigan continue its current contract with recipients of cash assistance (i.e. benefits will continue if the client is in compliance with work requirements), other states with time limits have been able to soften the impact. For example, Illinois "stops the clock" when the parent is working 30 hours per week; some states apply the time limit only to the parent and not the children in the family.

- Strict limitations on the length of time and the circumstances under which a recipient can count education toward the work requirement do not take into account the fact that circumstances outside of the recipient's control might necessitate a longer than anticipated time frame in which to complete a course of study, whether it is completion of a GED or a post-secondary program. For example, if an institution drops certain classes or reduces the availability of certain classes, a recipient may need to be enrolled an additional semester, in which case he/she would exceed the 24 month limit on the time education can be counted toward the work requirement.
- Individuals who have applied for SSI are often denied initially, only to be determined eligible following appeals and administrative hearings. While medical documentation of a physical or mental problem could exempt an individual from participation in Work First following an initial denial of eligibility for SSI, access to the specialists who might provide such documentation can be difficult for persons receiving Medicaid, assuming that their case has at least been opened to permit Medicaid eligibility.
- A "three strikes and you are out" sanction policy represents a very stringent sanction and one that could ultimately result in harm to children if resources are not available for the family to meet its basic needs at a future time.

The League believes that current welfare reform efforts are finally headed in the right direction with respect to the recognition that educational attainment and skills training can put individuals on the path to self-sufficiency. However, since that has not been the emphasis of policies and programming in Michigan and since funding in some areas, such as adult education, has been reduced significantly, it will likely require some time before the systems necessary to achieve the goals outlined in this package are fully operational. In the meantime, we believe that a strong safety net must remain in tact and that flexibility be afforded both caseworkers and parents, as they work within this new framework.